

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Aug. 28, 2007

Contact:

*Judith Ingram, Communications Director,
(202) 523-3240, ext. 127*

WASHINGTON- A delegation from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom traveled to Turkmenistan on Aug. 18-25 to assess conditions for religious freedom. USCIRF Chair Michael Cromartie and Commissioners Donald Argue and Imam Talal Eid comprised the delegation.

The Commission delegation met with government officials as part of its effort to examine the state of protections for human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, under the new government of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. Turkmenistan had been among the most repressive states in the world under the late President Saparmurat Niyazov, who died in late 2006. Since 2000, the Commission has recommended that the State Department designate Turkmenistan as a Country of Particular Concern for the government's systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom and related human rights.

Under Niyazov, virtually no independent religious activity was allowed and severe government restrictions left most religious activity under strict-and often arbitrary-state control. In addition, Niyazov's personality cult became a quasi-religion to which the population of Turkmenistan was forced to adhere. His government ordered that Niyazov's two-volume work of "spiritual thoughts," called Ruhnama, be given equal prominence to the Koran and the Bible in mosques and churches.

The 2003 law on religion further codified the Turkmen government's highly repressive policies, in effect banning most religious activity. It set criminal penalties for those found guilty of participating in "illegal" religious activity.

The new president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, has initiated some changes, including the release, just prior to the Commission's trip, of 11 prisoners of conscience including the country's former chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah. The Commission delegation traveled to Turkmenistan in part to ascertain whether these changes have made a significant difference in protections for human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, and whether further changes will be undertaken in the near future.

The delegation met with high-ranking government officials including President Berdymukhamedov, the ministers of foreign affairs and justice, and members of the Council on Religious Affairs, as well as with representatives of a variety of religious communities in Turkmenistan. The Commission will release detailed findings from the trip in the near future.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael Cromartie

,